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ABSTRACT

The past decade has given us an encouraging number of well-written and appealing children's books which give an authentic picture of the black people in the United States in dramatic text and brilliant illustrations. Indeed, in this period, a whole new sense of realism has come into children's literature which portrays urgent social issues and attacks racial and sexual stereotypes. It is impossible, however, to gauge the exact extent of these trends, since no complete study of children's book publishing has been conducted since 1965. Despite the efforts of many groups, it may be that this flow of newly published interracial books is slowing down. This is one problem, but a more serious one is the apathy with which teachers and, in some cases, librarians treat this whole issue. Many seem to feel that interracial books are only for black children, and they often display an almost total lack of critical sense in recognizing gross stereotypes. Even those teachers who wish to use these books may face constraints from administrators or the community. The greatest issue in the decade ahead is not getting more interracial books from the publishers--important as that is--but convincing all school staff and parents to bring these books to the children. (Author/SL)

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Ten Years After "The All-White World of Children's Books" by Nancy Larrick (Saturday Review, Sept. 11, 1965). Paper given by Nancy Larrick at the Social Responsibilities Round Table of the ALA, San Francisco, June 30 1975.

Ten Years Later

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By Nancy Larrick

The past decade has given us an encouraging number of well-written and appealing children's books which contribute to their understanding of and sympathy toward our multiracial world. In this period, a number of established authors moved into the multiracial scene: Janice Udry, for example, with What Mary Jo Shared (1966), Natalie Savage Carlson with Ann Aurelia and Dorothy (1968), and Olivia Coolidge with Come by Here (1970). New authors made dramatic entry into the field: Virginia Hamilton with Zeely in 1967 and House of Dies Drear in 1968, for example, and June Jordan with Who Look at Me in 1969 and His Own Where in 1970. John Steptoe's Stevie (1969) brought the black idiom into the simple picture story. Nikki Giovanni and Lucille Clifton, both black poets, created poetry for picture books. Arnold Adoff compiled several anthologies of black poetry.

And this is only a sampling of the children's books published during the past ten years which give an authentic picture of black people of the United States in dramatic text and brilliant illustrations.

The paintings of John Steptoe for his books and those of Evaline Ness for the narrative verses of Lucille Clifton show truly black children, proud of their blackness, and no mistake about it.

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From this sampling, it would be easy to assume that among the children's books published in the decade 1965-75, a large proportion accurately reflect our multiracial, multiethnic society.

I must remind you that was the assumption in 1965, too. We rejoiced in Roosevelt Grady by Louisa R. Shotwell. And The Snowy Day and Whistle for Willie by Ezra Jack Keats. Dorothy Sterling's Mary Jane was a welcome addition to our lists of interracial books for children.

But a careful tally of trade books published by 90 percent of the members of the Children's Book Council during the years 1962, 1963, and 1964, showed that of the 5,206 trade books for children brought out by these publishers, only 6.7 percent included one or more Negroes. And only four-fifths of one percent showed American Negroes of the present day. This came as a shock to many who assumed that the law of school integration prevailed in recent books published for children. The number of interracial books for children published in that three-year period was not large enough to crack the dominant pattern of the all-white world of children's books.

I know of no such tally since 1965. And unless all books are checked, title by title, it would be impossible to arrive at any valid generalization about the progress we have or have not made. I wish such a check could be undertaken.

We do know that this decade has seen expansion in the annual total of children's books published and now considerable

belt-tightening. Improved printing processes have increased the use of offset printing, thus facilitating the presentation of varying skin tones impossible with letter-press printing from line drawings. More black authors and artists have been drawn into the children's book field. Greater realism shows up at all levels from the black English of John Steptoe's simple stories to the bold street language of A Hero Ain't Nothing but a Sandwich by Alice Childress for teenagers.

In this period, the same sympathetic realism has been given free reign in children's books about various ethnic groups--North American Indians, Chicanos, and Puerto Ricans, for example. Similarly a number of books have attempted to break the sex role stereotypes prevailing in our society and hence in many children's books.

Indeed, a whole new range of topics has emerged in the children's book field: mental retardation, obesity, homosexuality, pregnancy, abortion, desertion, divorce, drugs, alcoholism, old age, and death, for example. It is not unusual to find several of these themes entwined in the plot of a single book for young teenagers. Have these very urgent social and personal issues taken precedence over interracial books on publishers' lists and library shelves?

I don't see all of the books published for children by any means. And I have made no attempt to keep a record of titles which reviewers tell us deal with our multiracial world. But I do examine the books in carton after carton received regularly

from six of the paperback book clubs, and I must report that I find few books that show a black face on the cover or hint at multiracial content.

This year as a member of the Children's Book Award Committee of the International Reading Association, I saw the 1974 books by new authors--first or second books. As I recall the lists, only three were about black children: one a picture book about children in Nigeria, the other two about black children in the United States. These were three of the most appealing and best written of the books submitted to the committee. But three is a very slim proportion of all of the books that came in.

I am fearful that the flow of newly published interracial books for children is slowing down. Despite the efforts of the Council on Interracial Books for Children and of many publishers, we do not have enough highly readable, stereotype-free books which will contribute to children's understanding and sympathy toward our multiracial world.

This is one problem. But a more serious problem, it seems to me, is the apathy with which teachers and, in some cases, librarians treat this whole issue. I teach in an area which is predominantly white but with a rapidly growing Puerto Rican population. In 12 years I have had only two black teachers in my graduate courses in children's literature.

The initial response of my white teachers to an interracial book is, "That's fine for black children, but we have no blacks in our school."

When this comment was made about a book of poetry by black authors, I asked whether this teacher ever read the poetry of A. A. Milne to her third graders. "Yes, he is a favorite," she said. "But Milne was an Englishman," I noted, "and your children are not."

"What about haiku?" I probed. "They love it," came the response. "Your children aren't Japanese. How can you read them Japanese poetry?"

I made my point, but I find that with each new semester's group I have to start again. Almost no student comes into my classes with any concern for widening the horizons of her pupils through stories, folk literature, or poetry about blacks or Puerto Ricans.

Furthermore, I find an almost total lack of critical sense when these teachers read books which to me are marred by gross stereotypes. Invariably they report positively on <u>I'm Glad I'm a Boy: I'm Glad I'm a Girl</u> without questioning the point that the boy is a doctor, the girl a nurse, the boy is the doer and planner, the girl the docile follower. "The kids like it," they say, and that seems to be enough.

<u>Charlie and the Chocolate Factory</u> never raises a sign of doubt until I point out the plight of the factory workers, the belittling names used throughout, and all the rest. Even after a carefully planned discussion of such factors in the book, there comes the recurrent explanation, "But the kids love it." Again that seems to be enough.

My stuients are all college graduates. Most of them have had an undergraduate course in children's literature. They know the names of the Newbery winners, but they have not approached any children's book critically. When I report the controversy over Sounder, some blacks praising it and some bitterly critical, they are non-plussed. They don't expect anyone to question a book that won the Newbery Medal.

In several instances, teachers who have built up some appreciation of multiracial books have found themselves blocked by school administrators. One substitute teacher took Jacob Lawrence's Harriet and the Promised Land to school to introduce in a study of the Civil War period. But on the way to class she happened to show the book to the principal who quickly recommended that the book not be used. "After all," he said, "it would be a violation of the Supreme Court ruling about religious teaching." The teacher acquiesced, and when she reported the incident in my class the other students agreed that she did the right thing. "You can't offend the principal," they argued. I doubt that that principal would have objected to Harriet if she had been pictured as white and beautiful. And I am sure he is one whose life is dedicated to not rocking the boat.

Recently I met with reading specialists from 23 school districts in Pennsylvania for a four-hour poetry workshop. I had sent out a bibliography in advance and asked them to bring in as many of these titles as they had on their library shelves.

Among these hundreds of books, I found only three books of black poetry: June Jordan's Who Look at Me, Langston Hughes's Don't You Turn Back, and Arnold Adoff's anthology, I Am the Darker Brother. The reading specialists were amazed that I might think books of black poetry would be appropriate for the white children who prevail in Lancaster and Manheim, Pennsylvania.

These are people who deplore prejudice and censorship. Yet through failure to purchase multiracial books or to raise questions about the bias and stereotypes that appear in certain books, they create the climate of prejudice and censorship. To me this is the most difficult situation to cope with because it is concealed behind a smiling facade of democratic practices.

Recently a citizens committee in Bangor, Pennsylvania, has discovered Richard Wright's Black Boy, originally published 30 years ago, and now in the high school library collection. Because it contains several of what the committee calls "undesirable words," action is being taken to force the school board to remove the book from the shelves. So far the school board is standing firm, the faculty is insisting that the book should be retained as a modern classic which is available for those who want to read it, and various parents have written strong letters to the editor of the local paper protesting action of the citizens committee. In the meantime, the book is enjoying unprecedented readership in this all-white slate quarry town in eastern Pennsylvania.

Such bold public censorship--or attempt at censorship--is easier to fight than the quiet undercover censorship resulting from narrow selection policies, the limited vision of teachers and school administrators, or the prevailing fear of rocking the boat.

Someone in Bangor was sensitive enough to decide that Black Boy should be purchased for white high school students to read. Someone else in the same position might never have thought of this as a book for white youngsters and would thus have avoided the conflict now raging in that community. Another person in the same position might have reasoned that it would be better to avoid the possibility of controversy and leave Black Boy to the schools of Harlem. In either case, the children of Bangor would have been the losers.

I have come to think that the greatest issue we face in the decade ahead is not getting more interracial books from the publishers--important as that is--, but is encouraging all teachers, librarians, school administrators and parents to welcome such books because of their multiracial content and to introduce them to young readers for discussion, criticism, and appreciation of their ethnic quality.

This to me is the great social responsibility which must be shouldered by all who meet with teachers, librarians, school administrators, and parents today.